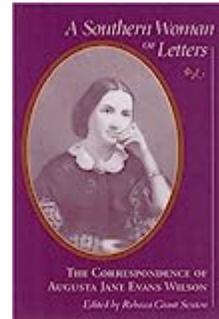


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Rebecca Grant Sexton, ed. *A Southern Woman of Letters: The Correspondence of Augusta Jane Evans Wilson.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. xxxv + 205 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-440-4.



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“Cacoethes Scribendi!” Augusta Jane Evans’s “Incurable Itch to Write”

Augusta Jane Evans (1835-1909), a Georgia native, published her first novel in 1855. She wrote to make a living, for her father had gone bankrupt when Evans was ten and she felt compelled to contribute to the family income as her parents moved from Georgia to San Antonio, Texas, and finally to Mobile, Alabama. Evans’s domestic novels centered around heroines who had to fend for themselves and make their own way in the world. The novels echoed Evans’s own life, as her work proved lucrative enough to support her and much of her family throughout her career. She wrote the majority of her eight best-sellers before marrying Lorenzo Madison Wilson in 1868. She and her husband settled at their estate, Ashland, in Mobile, where Augusta Jane Evans Wilson assumed the role of the post-bellum “Southern Lady.” Her production of novels slowed considerably and reflected the change in her circumstances, featuring heroines who were punished, instead of rewarded, for their independence. Her last work was a short story-cum-novel published in 1907.

Evans was a remarkably popular writer and one of the best-known novelists in the country during the nineteenth century. Children were named after her and her literary characters. Her novel *St. Elmo* (1866), about a

rake and the woman who demanded he reform himself rather than rely on her, reached millions of readers and remained in print through the first half of the twentieth century. When Evans died in 1909, her funeral outshone any others held in Mobile.

As a domestic novelist, however, and as a pro-secessionist, ardent Confederate sympathizer, and unreconstructed Rebel, Evans would have a difficult time making it into the pantheon of nineteenth-century *literati*. So, despite her status as one of the country’s best-selling authors in the nineteenth century, she is not in the canon of American nineteenth-century literature. Rebecca Grant Sexton’s edited collection of Evans’s correspondence in *A Southern Woman of Letters* offers good literary reasons for this. “Pedantic” does not begin to describe Evans’s style of writing. The term, after all, is defined as “narrowly, stodgily, and often ostentatiously learned.” Stodgy and ostentatious would certainly apply, but can a writer who quotes the Bible, Latin, French, and German with equal ease and routinely drops classical allusions be termed “narrow”? I think not.

Evans critic and New York humorist Charles Henry Webb perhaps had it right when he asserted that Evans had “inadvertently swallowed a dictionary as a child” (p. 137), thus providing herself with an inexhaustible font of obscure allusions, phrases, and words with which to

enlighten or bludgeon (take your pick) her readers. She was, as a novelist with nine published works (of which eight were best-sellers), determined to provide “guidance and moral instruction for others” through literature, according to Sexton (p. xxii). This she seems to have accomplished, as her books always sold magnificently—even during the Civil War, when her novel *Macaria* (1864), an apology for the Confederacy, reached best-seller status in both the South and the North.

Sexton’s goal in editing some of Evans’s letters is to add to our understanding of the lives of women during the nineteenth century. It is a goal partially met. Sexton edits Evans’s letters with painstaking attention to the letters’ contents. She has done a truly remarkable and outstanding job at discovering the sources of Evans’s inexhaustible (and exhausting) supply of obscure remarks, asides, quotations, and allusions. There are holes, however, that an editor and historian would like to see filled to better understand the context of Evans’s life and work represented in the letters.

Evans occupies a place in nineteenth-century culture that has been detailed in other sources, most recently in works on women politicians and female writers who participate in the public sphere carefully but determinedly, as did such Evans contemporaries as Ada Clare of New York, Anna Ella Carroll of Maryland, and Louisa S. C. McCord of South Carolina. Like these other women, Evans wrote to politicians (including Confederate Congressman J. L. M. Curry and Confederate Vice President Alexander Stevens) and generals (particularly P. G. T. Beauregard). She offered political advice. She offered military advice. She consoled losers (Beauregard), whose plans, she argued, were always better than the ones followed by those in power. She dressed her letters in the “requisite deference” (p. xxxi), as Sexton aptly puts it, and then sallied forth in her inimitable style to say exactly what she pleased.

The letters themselves provide glimpses of life in the deep South portion of the Confederacy during the war. Evans discusses politics throughout the period, details her work nursing soldiers in the hospital she established (named “Camp Beulah” after one of her best-sellers), and describes her painstaking care nursing an injured brother. In one memorable letter written to Curry in July 1863, she suggested that he change the public lecture topic he proposed to something that did not theorize on whether Southern women are affected by slavery “prejudicially” (p. 65). Evans accepted that it was true that slavery did not necessarily benefit white women. Because

white women had slaves, they did not labor. Therefore they did not want to labor. They could not work, since their lack of labor enervated them. But wait—it was not that they were morally weak or constitutionally unwilling, she wrote. White women did not run around as did their Northern or English counterparts, since, as Evans put it: “A southern woman who emulated the peripatetic performances of her English Sister, would unquestionably find herself the victim of Sun stroke, or brain fever” (p. 66). Yes, thought Evans, slavery was probably not that beneficial to white women. Perhaps Curry should turn to a topic in politics instead.

This edition includes primarily Evans’s letters to Curry and Beauregard, with whom she had close and long-running correspondence; it also includes letters to a confidante, Rachel Lyons Heustis of South Carolina, to whom Evans wrote repeatedly of her domestic affairs as well as her political opinions. These three recipients are chosen by Sexton because of the number of letters to them present, one presumes, in the twenty-two available collections listed by the editor. It would be useful to know exactly how many of Evans’s letters do survive, and what proportion of the whole the letters in Sexton’s edition make up. Such a measure would help place these three relationships into a clearer context. It would also be helpful to know about the rest of the collections and what types of letters they contain. The whole corpus of Evans’s correspondence is never delineated; consequently, the reader cannot determine where these letters reside within that corpus.

The book’s bibliography seems a tad dated; Sexton’s use of secondary literature is, in certain areas, very dated. She offers Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s pathbreaking work on women’s homosocial networks to interpret the Lyons Heustis letters, but then argues rightly that the work is less than useful, since the letters do not exhibit the homoeroticism that Smith-Rosenberg sought to explain.[1] Sexton’s alternate interpretation of the sometimes affectionate, sometimes distant relationship between Evans and Lyons Heustis—that Evans was famous and busy—suffers from the “so-what” factor. More distressing for historians is the marginal attention paid to military history, despite Evans’s consummate interest in it. Sexton relies on a fifty-two-year-old history of the Confederacy for most of her interpretations of Southern military actions and participants.[2] None of the current literature on women politicians appears; Mary Kelley’s eminently useful work on literary domesticity appears in the bibliography, but not in the interpretation of Evans’s work.[3]

For scholars in literary studies and women's studies (the book's designation by the Library of Congress), Sexton's work provides an adequate explanation of Evans's role within the development of the genre of the domestic novel. *A Southern Woman of Letters* also provides a glimpse of the domestic conflicts that many women writers persevered through and incorporated into their works. The book is useful for scholars of nineteenth-century history because it explains so many of the classical allusions that bedevil contemporary scholars. Sexton's edition of Evans's letters requires a bit more work, however, to fully explain Evans's importance in the history of nineteenth-century Southern women writers.

Notes

- [1]. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (1975): pp. 1-30.
- [2]. E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865*, A History of the South Series, vol. 7 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950).
- [3]. Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

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